

Kickass 257

Chapter 257

There's another long silence. But then, suddenly, Chloe blurts out a question that I never would have expected.

"Do you think you should... I don't know, try to stop him from leaving?"

Her question catches me off guard. I whirl around to face her, my mouth agape.

"Stop him?" I repeat, the absurdity of the notion almost making me laugh. But the laugh doesn't come. Instead, there's a hollow ache, a space where part of me wonders if maybe, just maybe, I wish I could.

"I couldn't," I finally say, shaking my head as if to dislodge the thought. "Why would you even ask that?"

Chloe's expression softens a little more. "Because I saw the show, Abby. The way he looked at you, the way he was... with you. Hell, maybe I've softened a little, seeing that. He seemed to really care, not just for the cameras, you know?"

"That's sweet of you," I reply, the corners of my mouth twitching upwards into a half-hearted smile. "But it's unnecessary. Karl and I..." I trail off as a lump forms in my throat. "We're never getting back together. That's not in the cards for us."

"I guess you two just seemed so close during the cook-off," she says with a wry chuckle. "And by the way, people are freaking out about him on social media. Along with #justiceforabby, there's also #mysterychef. People are eating it up."

I make a confused face. With a sigh, Chloe slips her phone out of her pocket, taps on her screen for a few moments, then holds it out for me.

On the screen is a screenshot from the show of Karl and I, standing beside one another, our hands touching. The picture has been zoomed in to the point of blurriness, but I can see it. And the caption reads: "Dear Abby, please reveal your #mysterychef! We're rooting for you... both of you!"

I can't help but laugh a little. "You're kidding."

Chloe shakes her head and slips her phone back into her pocket. "Nope. And that's just one post of hundreds, maybe even thousands by now. You two had some real chemistry onstage, so I thought..."

"Chloe," I say, steadying my voice, "trust me, there's nothing between me and Karl. Whatever we used to have is gone. He's just a friend now."

"If he's just a friend, then why are there tears in your eyes?"

Her words make me pause. I slowly lift a shaking finger to my eye, and when I pull it away, it's damp. I'm crying, and I didn't even realize it. All I can do is turn away, busying myself with a stack of papers on my desk.

"Look," she says, "I'm not trying to accuse you of anything. But I saw what I saw. And I hope you know that, although I'm a bit more open to Karl now, I'm still worried about you. About the heartache I know he gives you."

I keep my back to her, my fingers tracing the edge of a piece of paper. "I know you worry. And I appreciate it, more than you can imagine. But I've got the restaurant to think about, my staff... I have responsibilities, Chloe. To all of you, to myself."

She's quiet for a moment, and I know she's considering her next words carefully.

"I'm proud of you, Abby. For standing strong. For not getting swept away by the possibility of him." There's a hint of pride in her voice, a sisterly kind of approval that makes me feel a little bit warmer.

"But you know," she continues, a playful lilt entering her tone, "just because you're not getting back with Karl doesn't mean you have to swear off love entirely. There's a world of people out there who would love to be with a woman who's as passionate and dedicated as you are."

I can't help the genuine smile that spreads across my face. "I'm not swearing off anything, Chloe. Just... making sure that next time, it's the right time. And the right person. Not another 'Adam' situation all over again."